DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 048 769 EM 008 829

AUTHOR	Bittner, John R.; And Others
TITLE	College Administrators Reactions to News Coverage of Campus Unrest.
INSTITUTION	Purdue Univ., Lafayette, Ind. Dept. of Communication.
PUB DATE	24 Apr 71
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference (Phoenix, Arizona, April 22-24, 1971)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Activism, *Chief Administrators, College Administration, *Content Analysis, Demonstrations (Civil), Mass Media, *News Media, *Opinions, University Administration

ABSTRACT

College administrators were asked to comment on press coverage of disturbances at colleges and universities and to suggest ways to improve coverage. Two samplings of their views took place, one in 1969 and one in 1971. All pertinent replies were content analyzed. The main charges were of improper balance, news distortion, and/or inaccurate reporting. The idea was also mentioned that the presence of radio or television personnel may affect the intensity of a demonstration. Letters from the first sample were generally negative in tone, while data from the 1971 sample was similar in tone though less negative in intensity. By 1971, some administrators felt press coverage had improved. One suggestion was that universities might allow for fairer coverage by providing journalists with background information on events which might lead to crisis on campus. Excerpts from the replies are included. (JK)

ED048769

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS REACTIONS TO NEWS COVERAGE OF CAMPUS UNREST

This document was processed for the ERIC Document Reproduction Service by the ERIC Clearinghouse at Stanford. We are aware that some pages probably will not be readable in microfiche or in hardcopy. However, this is the best available copy, and we feel that the document should not be withheld from interested readers on the basis of these unreadable pages alone.

John R. Bittner, Norman Felsenthal, William Ketter

and Jon R. Mittler

Department of Communication
Purdue University
Lafayette, Indiana 47907

Presented at the Annual Conference of the
International Communication Association
Phoenix, April 24, 1971

EM008829

COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS REACTIONS TO NEWS COVERAGE OF CAMPUS UNREST

John R. Bittner, Norman Felsenthal,
William Ketter and Jon Mittler

American colleges and universities have received considerable exposure in the mass media during the past few years. Much of this exposure has been limited to broadcast and newspaper coverage of student demonstrations and campus unrest--coverage which a few angry administrators have labeled distorted, biased, and non-representative.

How widespread is this distrust and displeasure with the news media among college administrators? What can be done to improve the quality of public affairs reporting, particularly that reporting which deals with student demonstrations? In an attempt to answer these and other questions concerning the news coverage of campus unrest, the authors requested comments from the administrative leaders of over 100 institutions of higher learning. It is the intent of this study to reflect the collective and individual opinions of various university administrators who replied to a letter requesting their perceptions of news coverage by various media of disturbances which occurred at their institutions.

METHOD

Two sets of data were collected and the analysis of both sets is reported herein. Specifically, individually typed letters requesting "candid and forthright reactions to the news coverage of campus unrest at your institution" were addressed to the presidents or chancellors of colleges and universities throughout the United States.

The first solicitation of data was made in July and September of 1969 when fifty letters were sent to universities who had experienced some type of campus unrest serious enough to be reported by United Press International during the 1968-69 academic year. To insure an adequate geographic representation letters were sent to ten universities in each of five major geographic areas---Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West (excluding California), and California.

Each letter explained that it was difficult for reporters to accurately cover campus unrest and requested that administrators make recommendations as to how reporters would do a better job. All letters carried a radio station letterhead and the signature of the senior author with his title as President, United Press International

Broadcasters of Indiana. The form letter neither promised nor implied anonymity and none of the respondents indicated that their comments were "off the record." The body of this form letter is reprinted below.

> In the past few years many of the nation's colleges and universities have experienced serious campus unrest. Periodic campus disturbances have affected not only the major campuses, but also those with smaller enrollments. Often the recent period has been one of trial and error for college administrators who have had to deal with unrest at their particular institution.
>
> This same period has been one of trial and error for members of the news media who have been responsible for the reporting of campus unrest. Several of my associates and I are attempting to prepare guidelines for the coverage of campus unrest. We hope to provide recommendations and constructive criticism for members of the news profession who may be involved in the reporting of collegiate disturbances. To aid us in formulating these guidelines, I am requesting your candid and forthright reactions to the news coverage of campus unrest at your institution.
>
> Please feel free to comment on the actions of specific reporters, the types of coverage, or any other factors which you want to discuss. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Twenty-three of the fifty universities replied. Eighteen of these replies contained pertinent information while the other five explained that the president was out of town, out of the country, or recently retired. Fourteen of the eighteen useful replies were signed by the president or chancellor to which the inquiry was addressed; the remainder were signed by administrative assistants. The length of the replies and the personal quality of the comments indicated that the subject was one of keen interest. Most of the letters were two pages in length and several ran three. Frequently, the letters contained copies of newspaper clippings and/or statements of administrative policy regarding campus disturbances.

Most administrators seemed pleased that their opinions were being polled. "Your group is the first to solicit our views," said Patrick Aikman, director of the DePauw University News Bureau. "I'm not optimistic that this effort will change anthing, but it is a most favorable step."

A replication of the 1969 letter was prepared in March of 1971. This second mailing went to the heads of fifty-nine

universities who had experienced campus disturbances as reported by UPI following the 1970 Kent State deaths and who had not been contacted during the first solicitation. No attempt was made to establish a geographic balance in this second mailing though universities from various sections of the country were represented.

Response to this second mailing was more limited than that which followed the 1969 survey. Twenty replies were received but only seventeen were pertinent. The other three were administrative replies indicating that the president to whom the letter was addressed could not comment because of newness to the job or absence from the campus. Eight of the replies were signed by the president or chancellor of the particular university involved; the other nine were signed by administrative officers under the president. Generally, the letters were shorter in length and less personal in nature than those received in 1969. We are inclined to speculate that administrators consider the entire issue of campus reporting to be less pressing in 1971 than in 1969. This speculation is partially supported by the content of the letters (which appear in the next section of this paper).

All letters were perused by the second author who established seven content categories for data analysis. Three of these categories were negative and included charges of improper balance (between the positive and negative aspects of college life as they actually occur), news distortion and sensationalism, and inaccurate reporting. Two other categories were positive: a general statement of satisfaction with the fairness and accuracy of news coverage and a statement of appreciation for the fact that reporters want to improve their own reporting techniques by making a survey such as this one. The remaining two categories were labeled categories of concern. One of these categories centered around the belief that reporters and particularly cameramen intensify disturbances by their very presence. The second was the conviction that college administrators should be more active and more skillful in the operation of their information services.

Unit of measure for the analysis was the cohesive thought; i.e., a single sentence or contiguous sentences expressing a single idea. Two other authors acted as coders to verify the reliability of the category judgments as made by the second author. Inter-coder reliability was .884 with a widely used coefficient of reliability reported by Holsti[1] and .864 utilizing the more conservative formula developed by Scott.[2]

---

[1]Ole R. Holsti, Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p. 140.

[2]Ibid., pp. 140-141.

RESULTS

Letters from the first sample were generally negative in tone. Thirteen of the eighteen pertinent replies contained at least one negative statement charging improper balance, news distortion, and/or inaccurate reporting. Most of the statements centered around the need for better balance but five of the respondents made the more serious charge of news distortion. Six of the thirteen cited incidents of inaccurate reporting. Twelve of the eighteen letters contained positive comments and four expressed comments of concern.

Data from the 1971 sample was similar in tone though less negative in intensity. Ten of the seventeen 1971 respondents did make negative statements and improper balance was again the chief cause of complaint. Five letters contained charges of news distortion and the same number cited inaccurate reporting. Seven of the 24 positive statements noted improvement in the reporting of campus unrest, however. (Only one statement noting improvement by the news media was found in the 1969 replies.) Comments of concern were made by four administrators.

SELECTED COMMENTS FROM THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The best and most interesting material in many content analyses is found in the content itself rather than in the numeric tabulation of the categories. We believe that to be the case in this study and present in this section representative comments from within the seven established categories.

Improper balance. Two Southern university presidents, Stephan G. O'Connell of Florida and David Mullins of Arkansas, faulted news media more on errors of omission than commission:

"It is understandable that the press feels compelled to cover controversial stories on the campus, many of them involving burning issues of the day in our society," Mullins said. "However, it is difficult to understand and abide the press' refusal to give adequate and constructive coverage of the positive achievements of higher educational programs of teaching, research, and public service."

O'Connel added: "Because the press--broadcast and written--gives considerable attention to campus disruptions throughout the nation, I believe it tends to blind the public to the worthwhile accomplishments of the university and to the activities of the great majority of our students."

Charles E. Flynn, director of public information at the University of Illinois, believes that universities and colleges have been damaged by "loss of stature" with the public.

"This loss of stature must be blamed in part upon the media which have created in the public mind that the bizarre and nonconformist is typical of present-day college culture. Time after time the tactics of confrontation, sit-in, and take-over; the appearance of sloppy dress, unkempt beards and hair, and the language of the militants have been brought before the public as representative of the American college and university scene.

"Because of the very structure of American journalism. . . the nonconformist, whether he be burglar, murderer, reckless driver, embezzler or collegiate demonstrator, receives the headlines and top audio or pictorial coverage. . .One sees no headlines that millions went to church on Sunday any more than he will observe coverage that 95 per cent of the student body went to classes, the library, or studied."

"The blame doesn't fall to the reporters, but remains a management decision," according to Jeanne Barry and Al Kipp, public relations and publicity directors of Chicago's DePaul University. "As long as editors get their reporters out on the street when all hell is breaking loose and make no effort to provide the same type of coverage on less cataclysmic occasions, it indicates that the management endorses the stereotype of higher education as an absolute mess."

Distortion and sensationalism. The more serious charge that newsmen deliberately distort or sensationalize the news was made by a number of administrators. Robben Fleming, president of the University of Michigan, was the most outspoken and the most specific. He said that while still chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, a campus demonstration was extended two days beyond the students' intention "because, as they candidly explained to me, one of the national TV networks informed them they could not get their cameras in town for two days."

"My complaint, and that of my colleagues among university administrators, is that newspapers and TV stations appear to have almost no interest in the truth--rather they are interested only in sensationalism. Highly activist students exploit the media, and then gleefully report to their comrades what suckers the reporters are. The result is that the country is being polarized. Conservatives want 'law and order' at any cost, and radicals want no police at all."

Illinois' Flynn believes that news treatment of campus unrest has created a "carnival atmosphere" which deceives the public. "Treating a nationwide social problem in the same words, voice and manner as was done with the collegiate goldfish swallower in the 1930s is an error in both judgment and responsibility.

Peggy Black, director of public information for Ohio University, prefers to use the word "over-dramatization" but her charges are similar to those of Fleming and Flynn.

"Dramatized reports of one night of rioting by a fraction of our students helped, we felt, to increase the rioting the following night." Citing another instance, Mrs. Black believes that a wire service acted irresponsibly when reporters called the university public information office to check on facts for an elaboration of a story they had already put on the wire. The story, accepted from a caller unknown to the wire service, announced that students from other universities were invited to the Athens campus to participate in demonstrations and that arrangements for housing visiting students would be made. "One quick call would have verified the untruth of the story. As it turned out, we had to ask for a retraction."

Andrew Hamilton, public affairs officer for UCLA, believes that the fault with much news coverage lies largely with the nature of the media itself.

"A 90-second news clip provides the viewer with an entirely different notion of a student demonstration than a half-hour panel show which is able to explore in depth a complicated set of circumstances which lead to the demonstration. Likewise, a headline slapped on a fast-breaking story just before deadline may create a different impression from a carefully-documented story developed over a period of a week or more."

Hamilton believes that the "radical student left" has learned to "use" the mass media. "The press has become more sophisticated about evaluating news tips passed on by the radical left, but it still sometimes sacrifices news judgment in favor of crisis and confrontation."

Inaccurate reporting. Those administrators who criticized the accuracy of news reporting attributed much of the blame to inexperienced reporters with limited backgrounds in university affairs.

"Controversial issues are seldom covered in their broad perspective," stated Daniel G. Aldrich, Jr., chancellor of the University of California at Irvine. "Reporters concentrate on immediate action, accusations, and replies. Hence, there is must heat, but little light."

Dean E. McHenry, chancellor of the University of California at Santa Cruz, believes that too many reporters lack the background to properly cover emotion-loaded campus events.

"Reporters see isolated incidents, report them, and are seldom able to put them into perspective," he said,

suggesting that a solution might be a visit to the campus when disturbances are not in full swing so newsmen "will come to know students and their opinions as well as faculty and staff."

Newsmen are by nature an impatient breed, said DePauw's Aikman.

"They believe all things can be boiled down neatly and quickly, disposed of, and then go on to the next event. I admit that much news from college campuses can be treated in this fashion. We have a way of going on sometimes in our releases that makes professional men who receive them become skeptical and impatient. Consequently, when critical events like protests and riots do come along, newsmen retain their impatience, seek simple explanations, and produce simplistic coverage that misses the point frequently."

The press has only recently "discovered" higher education, said UCLA's Hamilton. "Before 1964 the newspapers were content to rewrite press releases and do an occasional on-campus interview, while radio-TV assignment editors were interested in a queen-crowning or first-day-of-football-practice films. . . . Some newspapers still pull a man off a police beat and assign him to cover a meeting of the Board of Regents."

Hamilton is optimistic for the future, however. He cited the development of a "new breed of reporter sensitive to the real issues of higher education and his responsibility to interpret these issues to the public."

Maurice Mitchell, chancellor of the University of Denver, suggested that universities provide both journalism students and practicing newsmen with some courses in "high tension press relations" to prepare them for in-depth reporting of campus and community crises.

Fairness and/or improvement in news coverage. Very positive comments about the media were received from administrators of three major New York City universities, New York University, City University of New York, and Columbia. Robert M. Brown, NYU's director of public relations, noted that the media themselves have become more selective in responding to reports of campus unrest. Joseph Meng, CUNY's dean for student affairs, believes that "the media have done, by and large, a very good job of getting to the root causes of campus disruptions."

Columbia's President Andrew W. Cordier credits the media with a "strenuous effort to secure accurate facts and to explore as thoroughly as possible the pressures of the situation, the causes of the protest, and the purpose of those expressing discontent.

Wisconsin's Vice President Robert Taylor was glowing in his discussion of improvements made by the news media over the past two years. He cited three specific examples to support his contention that "the media have improved the accuracy of their coverage . . . at least as much as we have improved our ability to handle them." These included the absence of "manufactured news" more common in the early days of student unrest, the diminished tendency of all media to overplay and sensationalize student protest, and the increasing evidence of responsibility by most newsmen.

A week-long occupation of an ROTC facility at Western Illinois University was covered quite fairly by the news media, according to President John T. Bernhard. Bernhard cited as commendable a specific case where a Peoria television crew decided against taking their equipment into the facility because they thought that their presence might prompt a "performance" by demonstrators. Instead, they asked the demonstration leader to accompany them to their vehicle for an interview. An ROTC cadet was also interviewed at the same site.

Appreciation. Several of the administrators indicated their gratitude that professional journalists were concerned about the proper coverage of campus disturbances. Indiana University President Joseph L. Sutton called the inquiry an indication of professional excellence while UCLA's Andrew Hamilton stated that he and other administrators were "grateful to you and other news executives for asking us to stop and contemplate now and then."

Presence of newsmen as a disturbing element. The tenor of most comments regarding the high visability of reporters was one of concern rather than complaint. Administrators seemed to recognize that journalists require certain visable tools like cameras and microphones to perform their tasks. Amherst President Calvin H. Plimpton described a television camera as "a strong incentive for some young man to indulge in an 'ego trip' and the opportunity to attract attention to himself and his cause often proves irresistible. I don't know what you can do about that."

Donald P. Anderson, director of University relations for Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology, suggested that broadcast crews employ an extra member who would stay apart from the regular crew to evaluate the crowd and the effect of his crew on the crowd. "The pursuit and reporting of news should not be hindered except through the self-discipline of the reporter," Anderson noted. "In potentially explosive situations, the reporter has as much obligation to the event he is covering as he does to the report he will file."

Improvement of information services. Denver's Maurice Mitchell was one of several administrators who stated that some of the blame for the unbalanced coverage of collegiate life by the news media rests with the universities themselves.

Mitchell noted that few universities take the time to prepare a "press kit" which gives the background to campus problems despite the fact that the events which lead to violence are known to university administrators and their staffs months in advance. "When there is nothing for a newspaperman or broadcaster to describe except a student standing on the steps of a building and brandishing a rifle, that's what is going to get in the paper. But when editors have all the background--or a great deal of it--and when they are taken into the confidence of the institution in order to inform themselves of the events that might lead to crisis, the press coverage from the very beginning is likely to be better balanced."

CONCLUSION

University administrators displayed a wide range of opinions in their reactions to the news coverage of collegiate disturbances. Some were clearly outraged and pessimistic in their outlook for improvement. Others believed that news media were doing an adequate job and were reporting incidents of campus unrest with fairness and accuracy. Regardless of their viewpoints many of the leaders surveyed in this study made helpful suggestions to improve the quality of news coverage.

The challenges posed by this survey are two-fold. Professional newsmen must make a greater effort to dig below the surface, to report the background as well as the incident. And educational institutions must take the offensive in providing newsmen with the information they need to accurately digest and report the events from the confused campuses of colleges and universities throughout the United States.